

(U) "Ask Zelda!": Short-Timers Are Short-Circuiting the Fun

FROM: "Zelda," Dispenser of Advice on Workplace Issues

Run Date: 05/02/2012

(U) The entire column below is unclassified.

Dear Zelda,



I happen to work with a number of older employees who are within a year or two of retirement. I have been employed for a few years and enjoy my job and have a lot on my plate to keep current and competitive, excited about NSA's mission and my future career and PCS assignments. These near-retired co-workers, kind and personable and knowledgeable as they are, complain a lot about the changes going on at NSA and often gripe about the number of years/months/weeks/days/hours or miles-to-commute yet before they can retire. I don't know how many times they have had their "figures run." I usually ignore them, but it does tend to "poison" the atmosphere and drain the enthusiasm of those around them. I can only imagine it does them no good, either, because it likely makes the time left drag on for them even more slowly.

I have tried including them in some of the intriguing things I'm learning, and that works for a while. Soon the complaining starts again. Do they just need to vent or what advice can you give those of us surrounded by employees just counting the days to retirement? And what advice could you give them, to help them endure to the end in better mental health?

-- Love my job

Dear Job-lover,

I'm glad the Agency has employees like you who care deeply about the mission and want to make a career here. Please accept my personal thanks for your positive attitude and attempts to include the **"Matures" and "Boomers"** in your office in your enthusiasm for this work! I hope they all read your letter so they can see how their short-timer attitude is affecting the newer employees.

You ask several good questions:

Do they just need to vent?

Yes and no. Part of it is venting, and that's just human nature; but part is actually enthusiasm for this new stage of life. Don't you remember when you couldn't wait to finish school and get out into the "real world" to start working? It's the same for them. They are looking forward to their next adventure: retirement, and all that it brings.

What advice can you give those of us surrounded by employees just counting the days?

It sounds like you have found a way to stop the complaining, at least temporarily. Here are some additional suggestions:

- Participate in their retirement countdown to show you share in their excitement over this milestone in their career. A simple ritual such as turning over a daily calendar page each morning might be all it takes to acknowledge the impending date, and then everyone can get back to work.
- Be aware that they might feel like technology or the times have passed them by. Point out that they still have a lot to offer, and bring them in on things they can possibly help with or contribute to.
- Suggest that they put all their organization- or target-specific knowledge down on paper (or better yet in a wiki page -- see **related article**) by creating some working aids or historical/reference documents for the office before they leave. (If they seem reluctant, a little flattery works wonders.) We don't want their expertise walking out the door with them!
- For those times when you feel them dragging you down with their complaints, don't hesitate to say just what you did in your letter. Tell them that you're excited about working here -- just as excited as they are about their impending retirement, and while you're happy to share in their optimism about the new adventures that await them, the complaints are starting to affect your own enthusiasm for the job.

What advice could you give them?

- Read Job-lover's letter. Limit your griping to others who share your opinions and situation, and don't poison or erode the enjoyment that newer employees have for the job.
- Reinvent yourself! Find a new role in the time you've got left. OK, so maybe your dream job (COBOL programmer?) became obsolete and the best parts of your current job are now automated. It's a bummer, to be sure; but you might be an excellent mentor for a computer scientist. Or a great staff officer, with your detail-oriented brain; or even a good manager. Spent your career as an operational linguist? Become adjunct faculty certified and teach language or area studies courses. Try something new to keep yourself interested and engaged. It will keep your brain young, too.
- If you've got a year or more left, this is your chance to branch out, take a risk. Explore an avenue you didn't pursue earlier because it wasn't a career-enhancing move. Now that there's no fear of stalling your career, take that leap. Even if it doesn't work out, you'll be retiring soon anyway. And if it does work out, you may like it enough to stick around a while longer.

In conclusion, Job-lover, if you can just hang in there and ignore the griping, the situation in your office will change on its own -- one retirement at a time.

Zelda

Note from Zelda to "Just Plain Uncomfortable": Zelda is concerned that, with other questions ahead of yours, she won't be able to give you a timely response. Please discuss the situation you mentioned with your EAS counselor and get his/her advice in the matter.